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Bargaining, learning and control: Production of consumption spaces in post-socialist context

ERIKA NAGY

Abstract

Post-socialist economies that had been considered as markets of high growth potential by retailers grew increasingly contested during the last decade. The growth and restructuring in the retail sector resulted in a deeper embedding into global flows of goods, increasingly diverse consumption spaces, and changing socio-spatial practices. At the same time, the shifts and turns in the discourses over consumption and citizenship reflected the variety of social interests related to this issue and also the rise of new agents challenging major retailers' dominance. This paper is focused on various interconnected strategies and practices – those of producers, retailers, property developers, local political elites and consumers – that are “at work” in post-socialist countries, producing new landscapes of shopping and driving discourses over consumption through which, individual and collective identities are constructed. Corporate strategies of retailers, such as their deeper embedding into post-socialist markets through the construction of supplier chains, branding policies, and exploiting local personal networks are analysed in political economic approach. Moreover, socio-spatial practices of consumers, whose decisions were (are) shaped by corporate strategies, as well as by experiencing and learning from past and recent changes are also discussed to reveal how new meanings are attached to various spaces. The findings that rest on series of case-studies focused on Hungary (Debrecen, Békéscsaba; Southeast Hungary) might support a better understanding of the production of consumption spaces and of socio-spatial inequalities in a post-socialist context.

consumption; post-socialist cities; retail restructuring

Zusammenfassung

Feilschen, Lernen, Kontrolle: Entwicklung von Konsumräumen in einem postsozialistischen Kontext

Im Laufe des vergangenen Jahrzehnts wurden postsozialistische Volkswirtschaften, welche vom Einzelhandel als Märkte mit hohem Wachstumspotenzial eingestuft worden waren, zunehmend umkämpfter. Das Wachstum und die Umstrukturierung des Einzelhandels sorgten für eine engere Anbindung an die globalen Warenströme, zunehmend diversifizierte Konsumbereiche sowie sich wandelnde sozialräumliche Praktiken. Gleichzeitig spiegelten die unterschiedlichen Entwicklungen und Wendungen in den Diskussionen über Konsumverhalten und Bürgersein die Vielfalt der darin involvierten sozialen Interessen sowie das Auftreten neuer Akteure wider, die die übermäßige Dominanz der Einzelhändler infrage stellten. Im Mittelpunkt der vorliegenden Arbeit stehen unterschiedliche miteinander verbundene Strategien und Praktiken – von Herstellern, Händlern, Bauträgern, politischen Eliten vor Ort sowie Verbrauchern –, die in postsozialistischen Ländern angewendet werden und somit für eine neue Einkaufslandschaft sorgen und zu Gesprächen über den Konsum anregen, wodurch individuelle und kollektive Identitäten geschaffen werden. Die Unternehmensstrategien von Einzelhändlern, wie etwa eine bessere Einbindung in die postsozialistischen Märkte durch die Schaffung von Versorgungsketten, Markenpolitiken sowie die Nutzung des persönlichen Netzwerks vor Ort, werden von einem politökonomischen Standpunkt aus erörtert. Desweiteren werden sozialräumliche Gewohnheiten von Verbrauchern erörtert, deren Entscheidungen durch Unternehmensstrategien sowie durch die Erfahrungen vergangener und gegenwärtiger Veränderungen beeinflusst wurden/werden. Diese sollen zeigen, wie neuen Bereichen automatisch neue Bedeutungen zugemessen werden. Auf diese Weise kann durch die Untersuchung verschiedener Schichten von Machtverhältnissen sowie alltäglicher institutioneller und individueller Praktiken ein besseres Verständnis des Auftretens uneinheitlicher Konsumlandschaften und sozialer Ungleichheiten in einem postsozialistischen Kontext erzielt werden.

Konsum, postsozialistische Städte, Umstrukturierung des Einzelhandels

Introduction

In October, 2003, a scheme for a large scale (45,000 m²) inner city shopping centre was introduced by a group of local developers in Kecskemét¹, a medium-size town of Hungary. The “Malom Center” development was welcome by local policy-makers as the flagship project for an urban regeneration program – replacing the old and dilapidated mill in the vicinity of the city centre. Despite of the disapproval of the plan by regional planning authorities for visual destruction of the traditional (protected) urban landscape², the project was completed in August, 2005, according to the developers’ plan. Although, the legitimacy of the licensing procedure was questioned – in fact, the mall exists ‘illegally’ today – and the scheme was a subject to a public upheaval and permanent protest of professional and local civic organisations and also to local and national political debate, the shopping centre is still open and advertised as ‘the new centre of the town’.

The stories of mall construction throw a light on various interconnected institutional strategies and practices – those of producers, retailers, property developers, local political elites and planners – that are “at work” in post-socialist countries, producing new landscapes of shopping and driving discourses over consumption through which, individual and collective consumer identities are being constructed. Although, institutional reforms that shaped such strategies followed a Neoliberal pattern and had many commonalities in post-socialist economies, the agents involved in the production of consumption spaces had to deal with various socio-cultural contexts at national, regional and local scale that rooted in earlier (pre-socialist and socialist) conditions and in the transition itself (STENNING 2005; STENNING, HÖRSCHELMANN 2008). Moreover, the rapid restructuring

of post-socialist markets produced various – often controversial – social practices and raised new issues in the discourses related to consumption in the last decade:

- The saturation of commercial property market in East Central European countries and the recent downturn have brought retail development ‘rush’ to an end, reinforced the competition of consumption spaces and changed the position of post-socialist markets in the conceived spaces of retail and commercial property investors (AC NIELSEN 2005; COLLIERS 2012).
- As the ‘post-socialist consumer’ grew experienced and increasingly conscious of market changes, new interpretations of relationships between ‘citizenship’ and consumption appeared (SHEVCHENKO 2002; SMITH, JELICKA 2007). Such changes were reflected by the above-discussed conflicts between local collective memory and retail capital, and also by the rise of various ‘grassroots’ networks (GULYÁS 2008) questioning the values mediated by the ‘hyperreality’ of new consumption spaces.
- The shifts in the perception and use of consumption spaces were fed also by national (mostly, conservative) politics arguing against the expansion of major shopping schemes (e.g. in Poland and Slovakia in 2007, and also in Hungary in 2011) and promoting the consumption of domestic goods contrasting ‘traditional’ to ‘global’ – commodifying the former.
- Nevertheless, until the recent crisis, major retail schemes have been considered as engines of urban regeneration programs and developers entered local growth coalitions throughout East and East Central Europe (COOK 2010).

The discussed changes suggest that the production of consumption spaces – by that, the construction of consumer identities – was an increasingly contested issue through which, we can get to a better understanding of the integration of emerging economies into the global flows

of commodities. In this paper, I focus on this issue, addressing the following inter-related questions:

How were corporate strategies constructed exploiting post-socialist conditions to get control over production and consumption processes and thus, integrated emerging European markets into global flows of commodities? How did (do) such strategies produce uneven consumption landscapes constructing new meanings and identities related to commodities and to shopping spaces, stimulating socio-spatial differentiation?

I discuss the above questions through the lens of political economy, an approach that has been subject to theoretical debates inspired by Marx’s concept on commodity fetishism – drawing the attention of scholars to the underlying systems of exchange and to the role of retail in the circuits of capital (WRIGLEY, 1996; GOSS, 2006). Discourses embraced key issues such as the conceptualization of retail capital and agency in the consumption process and the cultural embedding of corporate and individual practices related to consumption spaces – a set of ideas and concepts that offer a theoretical ground for researching consumption, space and retail restructuring in a rapidly changing, open market of limited transparency critically. My concept rests on the following results of earlier scholarly works done in the field of political economy of consumption and retail:

- The strategies of retailers are driven by the logic of capital (efficient use of resources, increasing productivity, etc.), that should be interpreted in the context of commodity chains – *not* separating production and consumption processes (CLARKE 1996; GOSS 2004). Retailers exploit their networked relations (their “in-between” position in the chain) to accelerate the circulation of capital and thus, to enhance the profit rates (HARVEY 1995; WRIGLEY et al. 2005; DICKEN 2007). Their strategies rest on the extension of control over production, as well as on the re-definition of the role of consumption by creating new aesthetics

1 Inhabited by 108,000 people and situated 80 kilometres away from Budapest.

2 Building permissions were issued by local planning authorities of municipalities (a concept used widely in post-socialist countries); appeals were sent to the regional planning authority that was empowered to withdraw the permission – as it happened in the case of ‘Malom Center’.

and institutional contexts for “reproducing desire” (ZUKIN, MAGUIRE 2004). Thus accelerating the circles of production (the entry of new products) and by introducing organisational and technological innovations, retailers became key agents of organising the global flows of capital (HARVEY 1995; WRIGLEY 1996).

- In this approach, space and various social interests, activities and interpretations are considered mutually constitutive. Consumption spaces “where everyday life meets the machinations of capitalism” (CLARKE 1996, p. 295) are not just the products of retailers’ strategies but of a wide spectrum of social relations (regulative environments, suppliers’ networks, local politics etc.) that corporate strategies are embedded into (WRIGLEY et al. 2005).

Thus, in the followings, I focus on consumption as an ‘institutional field’, shaped by strategies of various agents of the economy involved in production, distribution, regulation, and in the production of consumption spaces (GOTTDEINER 2000; GOSS 2004, 2006; ZUKIN, MAGUIRE 2004), considering retailers and property developers as key agents of this process – as producers of ‘material’ conditions of consumption by organising global flows of goods, commodity chains and also as mediators of ideologies related by constructing spaces for shopping on a rapidly changing market.

Although, retail capital and property developers had a powerful role in socio-spatial restructuring and in the construction of individual and collective identities, corporate strategies had to be adapted to post-socialist conditions that manifested in the volatility of political conditions, changing regulative environment, emerging business cultures, and also in consumption patterns shaped by the collapse of organisation of everyday life, identity crisis, disillusionment with the political programs of the transition, by the survival of former social practices – and also by various layers of identities and experiences accumulated by ‘post-socialist shoppers’ (NAGY 2005;

SHEVCHENKO 2002; STENNING 2005; SMITH, JEHLICKA 2007). Drawing the lessons of earlier studies (WRIGLEY et al. 2005; POOLE et al. 2006; DICKEN 2007) focused on the cultural embedding of corporate strategies and practices as a starting point, I shall consider the entanglement of firm cultures, national and local regulation systems and power relations in the construction of commodity chains and of consumption space in my analysis. Moreover, I discuss also the ‘lived’ experiences of shoppers in relation to the strategies of more powerful actors to understand, how recent socio-spatial restructuring of retail and consumption is rooted in the transition, the socialism, the pre-socialist conditions, and have a deeper understanding of the diversity of post-socialist transformations and of emerging capitalisms – as it is argued for by STENNING, HÖRSCHELMANN 2008, SMITH, TIMÁR 2010, PICKLES 2010 and STENNING et al. 2011.

The following analysis has several *methodological tiers* including i) the review of earlier scholarly work on retail restructuring and changing consumption practices, with particular regard to East and East Central European markets, ii) the survey of market reports of international consultancy firms on European commercial property markets, iii) and series of case studies focused on Hungary. The latter rested on quantitative as well as qualitative methods, such as “screening” the market processes through corporate, national and regional statistics, and analysing (national, local, corporate) policy papers and acts. The qualitative research was focused on changing consumption practices in two county towns – Debrecen (Eastern Hungary, 206,000 inhabitants) and Békéscsaba (Southeast Hungary, 65,000 inhabitants) – in two steps.

- In 2000, a local survey based on short structured personal interviews with shoppers at four busy shopping nodes of Debrecen was conducted, to understand, how new shopping facilities (a new DIY store, two hypermarkets, two shopping malls opened within four years prior to the survey) changed

consumers attitudes, practices and their attachment to urban space. The 395 respondents were chosen randomly. At the same time, the key agents of local retailing (9) were also interviewed to reveal their corporate strategies in relation to local, national and European market processes and institutional reforms. A second round of interviews (10) was made with chief executives of key agents (retailers, mall management) and with local politicians in 2010 to understand, how they adapted to market saturation, shrinking demand, changing consumption practices and to the stricter regulations on retail developments.

- In 2004-2005, a local questionnaire survey was conducted in Békéscsaba (1000 respondents; representative of by age, gender, education and place of residence by districts), that gave an overview of the access to shopping facilities, of the use of consumption spaces, and of the attitude of residents towards such spaces. In parallel, interviews were conducted with local retailers and developers (9) to reveal their strategies on an increasingly contested yet growing market and excavate their relationships to local politics. In 2010, I repeated the interviews nevertheless, with far less success (only 5 of the former interviewees existed *and* were willing to respond).

Moreover, to understand the social relations that underpin the growing influence of retailers over the production as well as the consumption process, a third case study was carried out, based on expert interviews (15) made with the executives of firms involved in the commodity chain in the meat processing/food retail sector in Southeast Hungary in 2010. The research was focused on how firm politics were territorialized – what firm strategies and tactics were employed on the emerging markets to extend the supply chains and exploit local resources, and how power relations are reproduced through everyday business practices of suppliers, reproducing dependence and backwardness in a peripheral region.

The relevance of choosing Hungary as a research field lies in the rapid and thorough institutional changes (neoliberalization) and market restructuring, the ideological status of consumption in a 'post-shortage' economy, and also in the "particularistic" business environment (HESS 2004).

In the followings, I discuss the role of retail capital as a driver of socio-spatial restructuring – of uneven development – at various scales in post-socialist countries. The role of retail capital shall be discussed in depth at local scale, through analysing the strategies employed by powerful producers of retail space in response to changing global (corporate) environment *and* post-socialist conditions. To avoid parochialism, I focus on understanding how spatially fixed capital (spaces of consumption) is produced, interpreting investors' strategies relationally. Based on local survey of socio-spatial practices of consumption (Debrecen, Békéscsaba) I shall discuss how shopping habits and thus, attachment to particular spaces were transformed by major retail schemes and how 'post-socialist' conditions can be discovered in this process. Finally, I give a brief account of that we can learn from the interconnected strategies of retailers, developers, local political elites and shoppers about the construction of socio-spatial practices under post-socialism.

Changing power relations and uneven development – retail restructuring in post-socialist context

Retail capital had a highly complex and manifold role in shaping everyday life and underlying social relations in emerging economies (NAGY 2001; STENNING 2005; GARSTKA 2009). Retail investments were discussed in post-socialist context as drivers of uneven development at regional and also at local scale by changing the access to goods and services, re-shaping and revalorising urban landscapes, and by introducing sign-systems that raised new attitudes and identities (SMITH, ROCHOVSKA 2007; TEMELOVA 2007; COOK 2010). Such

studies supported largely the rise of a non-essentialist approach to – and a deeper understanding of – post-socialist conditions through everyday individual and institutional practices (SMITH 2004; STENNING et al. 2011).

Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the interlinked strategies of powerful agents that shape socio-spatial restructuring in post-socialist economies through organising the flows of commodities. Major retailers extended their control over consumption *and* production (HARVEY 1995; MARSDEN, WRIGLEY 1996), by exploiting their intangible assets – knowledge and relations – flexibly in various social contexts (WRIGLEY et al. 2005; HESS 2004). As such assets are embedded into socio-cultural contexts of business relations and knowledge, retail capital is strongly anchored in host economies, enforcing permanent adaptation and an active involvement in discourses over consumption and economic policies (WRIGLEY et al. 2005).

Major European retailers developed their corporate strategies at international scale from the late 1980s on, that was a response to slow market growth in core economies, sluggish retail property markets, tightening control over large scale developments, and the liberalization of flows within the common market. The process was underpinned by an increasing concentration in terms of capital and organisation (M&As) (POOLE et al. 2002). In this period, transition economies were considered as risky markets – in Hess's term, 'particularistic' ones – characterised by a weak (dismantled) state combined with weak intermediaries and norms governing transactions, and by paternalistic relationships of retailers and commercial property developers (HESS 2004). Nevertheless, post-socialist conditions and global market processes stimulated a rapid internationalization and concentration of capital in the sector³, and an increasing control of major retail-

ers over socio-spatial processes that rested on capital-intensive developments in organising flows and on the introduction of new retail forms in the emerging economies (NAGY 2005; KACZMAREK 2009). Existing trends towards centralisation and market saturation were reinforced after the EU accessions (2004, 2007), as new agents (e.g. discounters, branded specialist retailers, mall developers) entered post-socialist markets, domestic competitors grew more powerful (COLLIERS 2007, 2012) and discourses over consumption grew more diverse and contested. As a response, corporate strategies shifted towards a deeper embedding – the exploitation of knowledge on local markets and national regulation systems combined with corporate assets of organisational and management skills and of relations, brand and place-based reputation, supplier networks and political capital – changing power relations and producing inequalities at various scales.

Corporate strategies for controlling socio-spatial processes at macro-scale

Major retailers grew influential actors of post-socialist economies by taking part in the definition of legislative/regulation framework of the sector through their professional organisations. Their role is reflected by the highly contested and belated legislation process regulating the sector, and also by the acts on retail (put in practice mostly after 2005) that basically cemented the existing power relations of the post-socialist markets⁴ (EBRD-UN FAO 2011; KNEZEVIC, SZARUCKI 2012). Retailers entered also the local growth coalitions, and became engines of Neoliberal urban redevelopment schemes and retail suburbanization in post-socialist cities (SYKORA, BOUZAROVSKY 2010; COOK 2010).

My interviews conducted in Hungary (2000, 2004/2005, 2010) suggest that major retailers combined formal ways of pulling their interests – setting up strong representative bodies at national level

³ In 2005, each of global top 25 retailers was present in the region, and the market share of new formats in the FMCG sector exceeded 50 % in ECE and in the Baltic countries (COLLIERS 2007).

⁴ Poland should be considered exceptional, as independent retailers had/has a strong political representation.

that articulate and deliver their concepts – with pressures made through their extensive personal networks *to shape the regulative (policy) framework of their activities*. The latter are considered as a source of stability by retailers at the time of major shifts in discourses over consumption. The latest “turn” in such discourses has been introduced by the conservative Hungarian government recently as a new policy limiting the construction of new shopping facilities over 300 m² (2012). As a response, international agents introduced new retail format strategies that rest on smaller scales, quality goods and services, and inner urban spaces, capitalizing on the knowledge accumulated in their global networks as well as on their embedding into business/personal relations through which, they got involved in urban regeneration processes.

Retail capital had a key role in regulating post-socialist market conditions also through *extending and deepening their control over the production process*. The quality control introduced in their distribution systems was a source of trust for the shoppers, as well as for producers seeking for new markets and stability (SHEVCHENKO 2002; NAGY 2005; EBRD-UN FAO 2011). My case study focused on the retailer-supplier relations in the meat industry in Southeast Hungary suggested that the centralised and tightly controlled distribution systems were tools for selecting suppliers, controlling them to meet national and EU standards, and also for providing a flexible system of supply in terms of amount, timing and pricing in volatile market conditions – transferring the risks to the producers. Retailer-driven organisation of flows rested on highly imbalanced power relations that rooted in the structural crisis of the transition economies (surplus capacities in manufacturing), on corporate practices developed on core markets (MARSDEN et al, 1996) and also on Neoliberal market reforms. As it was stressed by a supplier:

“...The introduction of the European food security system [HACCP] has not set new conditions or problems for us, as we

had much stricter regulations defined by major retailers.... Indeed, we are always afraid of receiving [quality] controllers from retailers, e.g. from the Tesco, because they peep in every corner and check every little details. If we fail, we must work hard for four or five years to get back into the inner circle, because there are many others [potential suppliers/competitors]” (the chief executive of a meat processing firm, 2010).

The EU-accession reproduced such relationships at a new scale, as food retailers organised their supply networks at macro-regional level (e.g. in East Central or in South East Europe), integrating the markets of the new member states into European commodity chains (EBRD-UN FAO 2011; SMITH, JEHLICKA 2007). Thus, international retailers acted as ‘gatekeepers’ of flows of goods for local producers through their international sourcing and distribution systems that had a macro-regional (East Central European) dimension.

As a consequence, suppliers had to adapt to new institutional contexts that were more professional and ‘distant’ (less personalized) than domestic ones, and were in conflict increasingly with the ‘heritage’ of socialism and of the transition. This ‘heritage’ manifested in public discourses in Hungary, revolving around the agricultural land restituted after 1989 as a cornerstone of building democracy and market economy, and recently, raised as a major issue in public debates over the restructuring of agriculture. The debate and its consequences produced uncertainty and hindered the development a reliable, stable supply networks for the domestic food processing industry – considered by the producers as a (missing) source of power in the bargaining process with retailers.

Post-socialist conditions are exploited by major retailers also in constructing their branding strategies that were set up to revalorize existing consumption spaces and re-position their networks on the increasingly contested post-socialist markets. Such strategies grew increasingly diverse and ‘fine-tuned’ to construct var-

ious consumer identities along income groups, mobility, skills in using IT, health and environmental consciousness and urban/rural lifestyles (COLLIERS 2007, 2012; EBRD-FAO UN 2011). They manifested in a wider spectrum of commodity groups (particularly, in the sector of convenience goods and of the apparel) ranging from retailers’ low-cost own-label goods to luxury brands and bio-products, targeting various, yet clearly defined social groups. The strategies included spatial organisation of consumption spaces (e.g. separation of quality goods within shops) and particular designs (packaging, spaces, brochures):

- In the convenience (FMCG) sector, the introduction of retailers’ own-label goods is considered as a highly successful strategy by retailers and also by producers. As the interviewees stressed, the success of the ‘reliable B-category’ retail brands rests on ‘classical’ market advantages stemming from post-socialist conditions, such as the trust of shoppers in retailers’ brands and the producers’ free capacities. Meanwhile, the introduction of quality food categories are considered as a tool for ‘attracting well-off, sophisticated shoppers, who might be model-consumers in the future and also for ‘re-positioning our stores within the market’ (stressed by the manager of a hypermarket in Békéscsaba, 2005). As the retail brands’ market was expanding, reinforcing the dependence of suppliers that are involved dominantly in formalised and imbalanced arm’s-length type relationships (HUGHES, REIMER 2004).
- The commodification of traditions and memories of the past – including brands that were the symbols of socialism – are also pillars of retailers’ branding strategies to construct ‘post-socialist’ consumers. Old brands are copied and sold in almost-identical form and package – offering a compromise of quality, memory and price. Paradoxically, the process is supported by the producers who supply their own branded food as well as retailers’

brands. As it was stressed by an interviewee,

- "... we are permanently under pressure to sell our recipe, but our registered geographical brand is our only asset that makes us different and makes profit, thus, we resist. Nevertheless, we are expected to produce just as good quality and a similar taste and scent for the retailer..." (the chief executive of a traditional salami producing factory, Hungary, 2010).

The commodification of memories has manifested also as a governmental strategy in Hungary. A political campaign that aims at remedying the crisis of rural spaces by promoting the consumption domestic products has been introduced recently. It rests on interpreting the 'countryside' as a source of quality 'that we know and trust' and defining the 'good citizen' as a 'responsible consumer'⁵. As a response, major retailers exploited their supply networks to adapt to the changes by increasing the proportion of domestic products – that is widely advertised by retailers and appreciated by the government acknowledging major retailers as 'strategic partners'. In this way – disguised by national political rhetoric – social relations of capitalism are being reproduced in a Neoliberal manner through consumption discourses (Goss 2004).

The organisation of commodity chains and branding strategies rested on a permanent organisational learning about the political economy of post-socialism. As it is suggested by AMIN and COHENDET's concept, context-specific knowledge – learning by practicing – might be translated into strategies and new routines within the firm (AMIN, COHENDET 2004), that is particularly important in the retail sector in which, exit costs are high (WRIGLEY 1996). Retail market reports, case studies (KACZMAREK 2009; SMITH, JEHLICKA 2009) and my interviews suggested that major retailers accumulated knowledge and relational capital on post-

socialist markets that are exploited in developing new strategies, in making their core market concepts 'transferable' and also in constructing commodity chains that are sources of innovation (own-label goods; local producer brands) and of flexibility under changing market and political circumstances. Moreover, the daily experiences of major international retailers on post-socialist conditions combined with their organisational knowledge and skills empowered them to enter and shape discourses over consumption. In this way, major retailers linked post-socialist consumers to global flows of goods – through their centralised distribution systems, global sourcing, standardised quality control systems and consumption spaces – and re-contextualised her/him within firms' strategies according to social status and preferences, while consumption practices were also 'standardised' through advertising, as well as through organisation and signification of consumption spaces (as it is discussed also by ZUKIN (1998) in the context of core economies).

In this way, corporate practices of major retailers produced a highly uneven socio-economic landscape that is an attribute of the emerging capitalisms, manifesting in equalization and differentiation at various scales (SMITH 1996). The process can be traced in the centralised sourcing/distribution systems organised at national and macro-regional scales, in the emergence of new dependencies within the commodity chains producing new inequalities regionally⁶, in the increasingly centralised configuration of retail (store) networks and also in the socially differentiated use of consumption spaces cities and also within stores and malls. In the followings, I focus on the local level to reveal, how the strategies of retailers and of other agents are formulated and interlinked in the production of

consumption spaces – putting *economic* processes into a local *political* context.

The production of consumption landscapes – business strategies and institutional practices at work in post-socialist towns

The Hungarian retail market exhibited the characteristics of post-socialist retail restructuring. Due to the relatively rapid progress in institutionalising capitalism, major retailers entered urban spaces as early as from 1989 on (MARCUSE 1996; NAGY 2010), and the scarcely structured demand, the increasing incomes and the belated modernisation of retail stimulated further expansion until the recent crisis. Regulation gaps were also exploited by powerful agents, as the licensing of retail schemes were delegated to local authorities until 2012, that lacked long term strategies and planning capacities to control retail restructuring.

"We have good relations with national governmental institutions, but there are regular campaigns when they just look for mistakes to fine us... Local authorities are worse. They have no strategy and no sectoral concept, or professional control over local decisions. They simply neglect us. There are too many personal interests operating at local level. In fact, the smaller is the town, the less professional the local authorities are, and the more local interests you have to consider..." (the manager of a local Tesco hypermarket, 2005).

As a consequence, the key agents of the retail property market had to enter local bargaining processes that carried risks. In case of failure, conflicting interests of various municipalities (competition for investments) might also be exploited, as local planning processes lacked regional embedding. This deficiency supported retail suburbanisation around Budapest – similarly to other post-socialist metropolises (Koós 2007; SYKORA, BOUZAROVSKY 2010). Although, a more comprehensive regulation system corresponding with European policies was introduced in 2005 that remedied transition-specific

⁵ The quotations are from the official website of Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. In the campaign, the countryside is introduced as a scene to reproducing traditions and to living in harmony with nature. (<http://www.amc.hu/>)

⁶ The competition within retailers' supply networks induced a selection and decline in the food sector. It was reflected by the declining proportion of processed goods within food export of the new member states (Török, Jambor 2012), and – as it was suggested by the Hungarian case study – reproduced regional disparities at the expense of regions dependent on agriculture.

deficiencies and conflicts⁷, the conditions of licensing (local bargaining) did not change fundamentally, as municipalities were empowered to put the act into practice. The tighter control introduced in 2012 made the licensing process less transparent and stabilised the existing, highly uneven structures. As the retail market grew highly contested and the purchase power has been declining since 2009 on, the ongoing centralisation process (in terms of capital and market share) was reinforced – nevertheless, domestic retailers and developers had an increasing stake in it⁸.

The re-organisation and re-ranking of retail spaces in smaller urban centres was spectacular due to their scale and their embedding into urban regeneration programs from the early 2000s on. The processes were shaped by corporate cultures and local contexts (as it was conceptualised by CURRAH, WRIGLEY 2004), to be discussed in the following two case studies. I focus on malls in a small/medium size town context due to their impact on retail restructuring and also on constructing particular consumer practices and identities in Debrecen and Békéscsaba.

The development of the 'Forum' shopping mall (32,000 m²) (Photo 1) exhibited a business strategy that rests on the combination of sophisticated planning and management techniques, on global sourcing of knowledge and on the post-socialist logic of property markets governed by personal relations and interests 'behind the scenes'. The scheme was realised in Debrecen (a relatively dynamic urban centre in an economically declining region), in a period when the local retail market grew highly contested (2006–2008). Nevertheless, the scheme fitted to the vision of local (dominantly, conserva-



Photo 1: The 'Forum' shopping mall, Debrecen (Tömöri 2012)

tive) political leaders of the revival of 'civic' culture and environment, and of 'model citizens' who are attached to the city centre – the symbolic space of local history associated with autonomy and prosperity based on trading.

The developer was a project firm (Dexim Ltd.) founded by local businessmen who exploited their relational capital in acquiring land at the development site and getting into the mall business with local political (the mayor's personal) support. The site – that the developer got for free to develop it as a commercial and cultural quarter – was a partly abandoned area with a high potential value in the urban centre, including a department store, a symbol of well-being of late socialism. In turn, the developer was obliged to build a new covered market place for the city. Although, the project was surrounded by scandals and public debates, as the project was made profitable at the expense of public interests (the market hall was criticised for its poor design) and of subcontractors (who were not paid for their work), the protests had no impact on the progress of the project⁹.

Since the developer lacked expertise in retailing and business relations for recruiting tenants and run the mall successfully, they entered partnership with the ECE Group that is present in 7 post-socialist EU-member states and Russia and is involved in the development of 'quality retail space' in cities of various size and rank. The Group's development schemes rest on regular in-depth scanning of post-socialist markets and the firms' extensive business relationships. The ECE concept for the 'Forum' mall – that rested on a sophisticated analytical and planning toolkit – exploited the advantages of the fragmented regional market, of EU enlargements (attracting shoppers from Romania) as well as the interpretation of the 'nation' in cultural term that makes Debrecen (as it is declared by a local conservative politician) 'the intellectual centre of Hungarians on both sides of the national border'.

The mall management perceived Debrecen as a conservative and self-contained community, that makes personal relationships highly appreciated and a basis for their localised strategy in managing the mall. Post-socialist characteristics remained implicit in the interview; nevertheless, they manifested in the emphasis on formal and informal relations that guides and supports the local embedding of the mall. Today, the 'Forum' –

7 The act focused on registration and licensing, conditions of running retail businesses, controlling the origin of goods, the opening hours, and defined the legal framework of retailer-supplier relations – nevertheless, it was criticised by domestic retailers' NGOs for lack of further specification, that (implicitly) favoured major agents.

8 In 2011, there were 170 hypermarkets (30 % in and around Budapest) and 117 shopping malls (41 % in the Budapest region with 71 % of mall tenant shops) operating in Hungary (COLLIERS 2012). By 2011, the top 10 FMCG retailers had 72 % share in annual sales – including 3 domestic organisations.

9 The new mall was also criticised by local professional organisations for its postmodern character that doesn't fit the urban landscape. In response to the critics, the designer, a famous architect (headquartered in Budapest), said "in architectural term, there is no such a thing as Debrecen character" (www.epiteszforum.hu).

as it is suggested by its name – fulfils a triple role, as a focus of local cultural life, as the 'host of leading fashion brands' in the region¹⁰, and as a 'new animation point' for festival tourism.

The mall sector is dominated by international agents in terms of development and also of management in Hungary. Domestic actors had (have) a different scope, due to their stronger dependence on sourcing capital from the domestic financial markets, and to the less diverse (global) relational capital that makes recruiting tenants more uncertain and conditional of the local context. The 'Csaba Center' city centre shopping mall (80,000 m² completed in 2001) was developed and is being run by a local company (local owners) in Békéscsaba (65,000 inhabitants), Southeast Hungary. The region was hit heavily by the transition crisis and remained 'peripheral'¹¹ even in the years of the boom of the national economy.

The local context of the mall development exhibited specific local and also post-socialist conditions. The development site on the edge of the town centre had been cleared off for a new retail space *before* the transition. Gypsy families and tenement houses had been removed from the area by the mid-1980s, exhibiting the mechanisms of 'socialist' (controlled) gentrification (HEGEDÜS, TOSICS 1993; TIMAR, NAGY 2012) and the trends toward the modernization of consumption spaces under socialism.

The developers' concept rested on their deep knowledge on the local market and on the political context, moreover, on a clear vision of inducing structural changes within the region by introducing a set of branded spaces on an emerging and a scarcely segmented market. The developers adopted a classical 'global' strategy for producing consumption spaces that rested on the concentration of branded spaces (in which, the



Photo 2: The 'Center lido': an illusion of a beach party in middle of the town (www.csabacenter.hu)

Centre had/has a regional monopoly) and on exploiting the public discourses connecting consumerism and citizenship. The key issues raised in such debates were translated into a business strategy that manifested in the events and the organisation of spaces within and around the mall:

i) Interpreting the mall as a public space that is protective beyond its physical boundaries, by organising events that celebrate traditional values ('Wedding fair' in February), the abundance of 'family programs', and by surveillance – particularly, in the 'drug policy' of the management, reflecting the (dominant) negative attitude of the residents towards this issue, and exhibiting the mall as a 'safe place'¹²;

ii) Exploiting the public discourse over health (declining life expectancy and Neoliberal reforms that 'hollowed out' public health institutions) and exhibiting the mall as a promoter of healthy lifestyle through public events and by providing space for health and sports services at market prices;

iii) Adopting the ideology of Neoliberal consumerism – taking the mission of 'educating' the post-socialist shopper who got lost in the abundance of information and help her/him to choose better quality, healthier food and a different life in the branded space of the mall.

By targeting the middle/upper class and young shoppers, providing space for branded retailers and offering new residential spaces for well off in the adjacent residential blocks, the mall developers stimulated gentrification and an overall decline in the adjacent main shopping area of the city centre.

10 Saturn, Zara, Bershka, Stradivarius, Pull & Bear, Tommy Hilfiger, Wrangler, Esprit, Mexx, Hervis, C&A, H&M, a Libri bookshop and a Spar supermarket are present in the mall.

11 The term was used by local interviewees.

12 'There is no drug dealing in the Centre, it is safe, we bundled all those who take it' as a manager of the mall said in an interview for the local newspaper. Taking drugs is considered as crime and rejected by the majority of residents in Békéscsaba, as our review (2004) reflected it.



Photo 3: Public cycling on the 'Days of Health' (www.csbacenter.hu)

Although, the developers' strategy rested on a deep knowledge of local (regional) social structures, they faced with difficulties in realising their business strategy. It manifested as a permanent conflict between the local political elite and the shopping centre's owners, interpreted as a fight for controlling local socio-spatial processes by the latter¹³. This 'competition' was reinforced by recent urban regeneration programs (supported by the EU) that provided new public spaces for cultural events organised by public (partly, municipal) institutions, that are in desperate need for funding and contributors. Despite these conflicts, the strategies of the mall developers and those of the local political elite produced highly selective socio-spatial processes, characteristic also of other post-socialist cities (HIRT, KOVACHEV 2006; BOROS et al. 2010).

Local case studies suggested that the development of consumption spaces is embedded into a bargaining process through which, corporate strategies are mutated rather by the interests and ambitions of local political elites than by "public good" articulated by citizens. The major power

of municipalities in controlling retail restructuring that rooted in the transition (i.e. in the belief in *local* institutions as pillars of the new democracy) was exploited by local political groups skilfully to re-design urban space and cooperate (or compete) with retailers and developers in this process. As a consequence of this bargaining "behind the scenes", the new spaces of consumption (including malls, as well as public spaces for festivals and for "high culture") are the arenas of constructing citizenship and thus, also to exclusion – with little chance for social resistance in lack of public discourse.

Changing consumer practices in a post-socialist context

A large body of academic work has been published on the geography of consumption since the late 1980s. Discourses were fuelled by the emerging all-powerful role of consumption in shaping social relations and in the construction of the self (HARVEY 1995; MILES, MILES 2004; MANSVELT 2006), and addressed fundamental issues of contemporary society such as inequalities, social control, and ethical questions related to consumption (GOSS 2004; MANSVELT 2006). In discussing post-socialist consumption practices, I was inspired by the Marxist traditions

(HARVEY 1995; ZUKIN 1998), and also by 'culturalist' studies focused on consumption practices and the construction of the self (GLENNIE, THRIFT, 1996; MILLER 2001). Thus, I discuss post-socialist consumption practices as the products of retail capital that manifests through relations to (the use of) local consumption spaces produced by corporate strategies and also by socio-spatial practices of consumers, whose decisions were (are) fashioned by experiencing and learning from past and recent changes.

Consumption was considered as a political issue from the 1970s on by communist parties in the eastern half of Europe that was reflected by the development of retail networks and by shopping development schemes focused on major cities (SZELÉNYI, COSTELLO 1996). In Hungary, consumption was considered as 'marker' of quality of life by the 1980s, that made hundreds of thousands of active earners to take a job in the 'second economy' – equalizing social differences in the pre-transition period. Advertising in the media and in public spaces was also introduced and it was as manipulative as in the West, attaching symbolic meanings to things (KOLOSI 2000; VÖRÖS 1996). Thus, the post-socialist shopper should not be considered inexperienced and defenceless – and hardly a homogeneous category – in Hungary at the beginning of the transition.

The introduction of market institutions and the dismantling of redistributive systems stimulated social restructuring, and consumption was considered as a key element of this process (KOLOSI 2000; SZALAI 2006). Nevertheless, sociologists interpreted consumption rather as a product of social relations of capitalism than a driver major social changes. As it is argued by HETESI et al, the structure and practices of consumption was defined by the social status but limited by the low level of incomes for the majority of the society in Hungary. Status (class-) dependent patterns are indicated and also reproduced by the major retailers' strategies – defined along social status groups (HETESI et al. 2007).

¹³ It was mentioned in relation to the slow licensing procedure in the second phase of the mall development (2009-2010) and also to (not) permitting the temporary use of public spaces (the main street) for festivals organised by the mall.

Local surveys and interviews provide a deeper insight into consumption practices, thus, make us understand the relationships between retailers' and consumers' strategies. Our local interviews made in Debrecen (2000) suggested fundamental changes and also the survival of 'socialist' techniques of getting the needed (desired) goods. New consumption spaces were highly appreciated for being diverse and offering various brands by shoppers, who experienced the immediate satisfaction of needs – and being involved in the global flows of goods orchestrated by retailers. The majority of economically active, particularly, the young and well off changed consumption practices in terms of space, timing and also of choices (buying new products) and such changes were linked to new spaces. Goods and spaces were 'ranked' by quality and also by reliability, reflecting the danger of deceit as a 'side product' of the transition of retailing (see also SHEVCHENKO 2002). Shoppers contrasted rapid changes amongst local retailers and the uncontrolled 'wild capitalism' of the open markets to the new schemes and global brands offered there. Nevertheless, the open markets remained important scenes to shopping – making good business through bargaining, and getting low-price goods not available in the new stores. Risks (and failures) were considered as 'natural' side products of such transactions that rooted in the traditions of the emerging 'second economy' under socialism. Moreover, the adaptation to changing conditions was a source of conflicts and criticism (due to the 'sensational overload' in new spaces and to rapid transformation of the store network).

Shoppers did not consider new spaces of consumption as sources of citizenship explicitly. Nevertheless, they took series of changes as a "way out" from the economy of shortage and also from the uncertain conditions of the transition, appreciating (by 80 % of respondents) the possibility of choice and the "stability" (in term of quality of goods) offered by the new retail facilities. In this period, new consumption practices were rather reac-

tions to the deficiencies of the socialist economy and to the rapid changes of the 1990s than articulations of a new consumer society (lacking/sparse brand orientation, taking shopping as work, etc.). Nevertheless, the interviews made with local retailers in 2010 unfolded a very different picture: a segmented (in fact, an increasingly polarized) market divided by branded spaces of the city centre along income and age, a highly differentiated "landscape" of post-transition consumption spaces, and an increasing contrast between being citizen in the revitalized city centre and not being "valuable consumer" in the mall next to it.

New retail spaces and related practices were sources also of learning. The survey over changing consumption practices (2004) and the interviews with local retailers in Békéscsaba (2010) reflected this process and suggested the rise of a more careful, skilled and conscious post-socialist shopper in the 2000s. As new consumption spaces linked local shoppers to global flows and new techniques of shopping were introduced, the attachment of local consumers' to different places was also transformed.

- i) Traditional spaces were (are being) re-interpreted: due to the tighter regulations (2005; 2012) and the recent discourse linking consumption to safety and patriotism fuelled by the conservative government, the open market is considered rather as a source of cheap, fresh, healthy local food for all social groups, than a post-socialist scene to risky businesses.
- ii) The city centre was 'lost' for many local people due to its increasingly polarised retail structure and to the gentrification processes. Thus, while the new city centre mall offered safe, reliable space and a spatial context for re-defining individual identities, the decline of the main shopping street¹⁴ raised a fear of losing local citizenship. The criticism was articu-

lated by local intellectuals, and also by elderly and low income groups in our questionnaire survey. Moreover, the latter two groups considered the mall alien to their lifestyle and felt marginalised as shoppers and responded by avoiding the mall.

- iii) Along with it, new 'alternative' spaces of conscious consumption emerged such as the 'green' market organised by local NGOs for products of the region's ecological farms, as a response to uncertainties related to global flows and to the offer of major food stores. Such initiatives were (are being) appropriated and commodified by (party) politics discussed above.

Shopping practices suggest that the post-socialist consumer was/is being constructed by various strategies and discourses driven by major retailers and developers, by national and local policies and – to a much less extent – by citizens' grassroots organizations. Despite the conflicts raised by the competition for controlling (quasi-)public spaces, private and public agents' strategies resulted in similar, selective socio-spatial practices and exclusion in urban centres. Consumers' decisions are made as a response (in relation) to major retailers' – in a small town context, powerful – strategies, despite the emerging criticism and resistance in consumption practices. Nevertheless, the majority of local shoppers had (has) a very limited scope in terms of income, knowledge, information, physical access to act consciously and freely and change existing power relations that drive changes in urban space – largely, due to the "hidden" mechanisms (local bargaining processes) behind the development processes.

Conclusions

The institutional context and socio-spatial practices of consumption have been transformed thoroughly in post-socialist countries since 1989. This process was shaped by strategies of various agents that were interlinked and rested on imbalanced power relations. Retail capital

¹⁴ Closing down of specialist apparel shops, mushrooming of second hand and cheap Chinese stores, high vacancy rates grew permanent even on the high street despite pedestrianization and face-lifting schemes.

– major retailers and commercial property developers – had a key role in producing new spaces of consumption, constructing social practices and identities related such spaces, and organising complex networks across various scales to link post-socialist spaces and consumers to global flows of goods, information, knowledge and people – to the circuits of capital. The conditions of the transition and of the emerging capitalisms were sources of growth potentials and also of risks for retail capital that is – by its nature – strongly embedded into host economies. The strategies of retailers expanding on post-socialist markets rested on deeper embedding through various networks. (i) The organisation of (national/macro-regional) supply networks that rested on the ‘classical’ power asymmetry of buyer-driven commodity chains was pillar of such strategies. To get control over the production, retailers exploited post-socialist and transitory conditions and Neoliberal institutional practices employed by the emerging capitalist state to modernize the retail sector. (ii) The supply networks – the imbalanced power relations – were exploited skilfully by retailers to tackle market changes, such as the entry of new competitors and declining purchase power, moreover, to respond to changes in consumption discourses in volatile post-socialist political conditions. (iii) Through supply networks, retailers introduced branding strategies tailored to post-socialist markets, incorporating own-label goods (exploiting trust in global agents) and also traditional, well-known producers’ brands, commodifying the memories of the (socialist/pre-socialist) past. (iv) While supply networks provided flexibility in adapting to macroeconomic trends, a net of personal relationships (ranging from global to local) was constructed to realise localised corporate strategies. The deficiencies of planning control over retail spaces was exploited through local bargaining processes treating major retail schemes as ‘exceptionality measures’ in a Neoliberal manner (discussed also by COOK 2010; SYKORA/BOUZAROVSKI 2010).

Moreover, local relationships were exploited for embedding shopping schemes into urban space – by fulfilling public roles and thus, mediating discourses over consumption and citizenship.

Socio-spatial practices suggest that the ‘post-socialist consumer’ grew more careful, skilled and conscious in her/his decisions – exploiting changing conditions and developing increasingly critical attitudes towards things (goods) and places. Nevertheless, such changes are highly dependent on social status/class, particularly, on income, education skills and mobility. Thus, consumption patterns are diverse, yet largely influenced by values and ‘models’ mediated major retailers – that is counteracted by consumers favouring ‘traditional’ (socialist and pre-socialist) brands and spaces and adopting ‘alterntive’ consumption patterns. In his way, a highly differentiated consumption landscape has emerged – shaped by various business and political strategies, surviving traditional (pre-transition) practices and new consumption ideologies – that is a source of socio-spatial inequalities ‘lived’ by post-socialist consumers in their daily practices.

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Résumé

ERIKA NAGY

Négociation, apprentissage et contrôle: création d'espaces de consommation dans le contexte postsocialiste

Les économies postsocialistes qui avaient été considérées comme des marchés à fort potentiel de croissance par les détaillants ont connu une contestation de plus en plus forte au cours des dix dernières années. La croissance et la restructuration du secteur de la vente au détail a plongé plus profondément le pays dans des flux mondialisés de marchandises, a créé des espaces de consommation de plus en plus diversifiés et modifié les pratiques sociospatiales. En même temps, les évolutions et les voltefaces des discours sur la consommation et la citoyenneté ont reflété la variété des intérêts sociaux concernant ce problème et également l'émergence de nouveaux agents mettant en question la prédominance des gros détaillants. Cet article se concentre sur les diverses stratégies et pratiques interconnectées, celles des producteurs, des détaillants, des promoteurs immobiliers, des élites politiques locales et des consommateurs, qui sont „au travail” dans les pays postsocialistes, créent de nouveaux environnements d'achat et sur une réflexion sur la consommation qui a un effet d'entraînement et est à la base des identités individuelles et collectives. Les stratégies commerciales des détaillants, comme leur implication plus profonde dans les marchés postsocialistes par la mise en place de chaînes de fournisseurs, politiques de marques et l'exploitation de réseaux personnels locaux sont abordées dans une approche économique politique. De plus, les pratiques sociospatiales des consommateurs, dont les décisions ont été ou sont formatées par les stratégies des groupes industriels de même que par leurs expériences et ce qu'ils ont appris par les changements passés et récents, sont aussi analysées pour mettre en évidence comment de nouvelles significations sont attribuées aux espaces. De cette façon, en creusant les différentes strates des relations de pouvoir et des pratiques institutionnelles et individuelles quotidiennes, nous accédons à une meilleure compréhension de l'apparition de paysages de consommation disparates et des inégalités sociales dans le contexte postsocialiste.

Consommation; villes postsocialistes; restructuration du commerce de détail

Резюме

ЭРИКА НОДЬ

Договариваться, учиться, управлять: развитие сферы потребления в постсоциалистическом контексте

За последние десять лет конкуренция в рамках постсоциалистических экономик, которые с точки зрения розничной торговли рассматривались как рынки с высоким потенциалом роста, всё более нарастала. Рост и реструктуризация розничной торговли способствовали более тесной интеграции в рамках глобального товарооборота, развитию всё более диверсифицированной структуры потребления и изменяющихся социально-пространственных практик. В то же время развитие и весь ход дискуссий по потребительскому поведению отражали разнообразие соответствующих социальных интересов, а также появление новых акторов, что ставило под сомнение чрезмерное доминирование ритейлеров. В центре внимания настоящей работы находятся различные взаимосвязанные стратегии и практики – производителей, дистрибьюторов, девелоперов, местных политических элит, а также потребителей – применяемые в постсоциалистических странах и тем самым создающие новый торговый ландшафт и стимулирующие дискуссии по вопросам потребления, в результате чего формируются индивидуальные и коллективные идентичности. Корпоративные стратегии ритейлеров, такие как лучшая интеграция в рамках постсоциалистических рынков путем создания системы поставок, бренд-политики и использования личных связей на местах, обсуждаются с политико-экономической точки зрения. Далее рассматриваются социально-пространственно ориентированные привычки потребителей, на предпочтения которых оказывали / оказывают влияние корпоративные стратегии, а также прошлый и современный опыт. Таким образом, благодаря изучению различных уровней властных отношений, а также повседневных институциональных и индивидуальных практик может быть достигнуто более глубокое понимание возникновения неоднородных ландшафтов потребления и социального неравенства в постсоциалистическом контексте.

Потребление, постсоциалистические города, реструктуризация розничной торговли